

As someone who grew up in inner-city Atlanta, I understand there are times when people need whatever help they can find. The social safety net—in conjunction with generosity from neighborhood groups, churches, charities, and private companies—can help lift Americans out of poverty and toward the path of self-reliance and individual prosperity. However, that "net" should never turn into a "hammock"—and that is what this President and his policies are allowing.

What we see today with our vast social safety net is a growing and frightening dependency on the federal government, which is increasingly replacing our important local and private charitable efforts. The Heritage Foundation's newly released 2012 Index of Dependency on Government show some stark details about a nation of reliance and how it's devastating our nation's fiscal future.

by Allen B. West

This annual study by The Heritage Foundation analyzes federal assistance programs for everything from housing, health care, and food stamps to college tuition and retirement assistance. And there are some alarming numbers indeed.

An estimated one in five Americans now receives aid from the federal government. That translates into more than 67.3 million Americans who rely on federal dollars for their way of life. Additionally, the amount the average American receives in federal benefits jumped to \$32,748 in 2011; this surpassed the average working American's disposable personal income of \$32,446. At the same time, the federal taxpayer base continues to shrink, with nearly half of the U.S. population not paying any federal income taxes.

Is this a vision of President Obama's doctrine of fairness and economic equality? Our democratic government is at risk when there are more Americans who are wedded to the federal government—either by subsistence or employment check—than federal taxpayers to pay for the rampant spending.

What do you think will happen when producers realize they are working for the entitlement class

or the state, instead of their own families and the American dream? Eventually, they will stop producing. As Margaret Thatcher said, the government will "run out of other people's money."

I fear the future does not hold much hope for reversing this trend. With the impending retirement of 77 million baby boomers and the continued liberal march toward government involvement in all parts of life, the trend in the number of Americans dependent on Washington seems to have only one direction: up.

But I have hope. The essence of the American spirit does not want to be obliged to government for our daily routine. Americans want to fight for their independence and be successful providers for themselves and their families.

We in Congress need to do our part to aid the struggle for more personal responsibility. We need to reduce government spending levels so we are taking less from America's producers of economic growth. We need to take a long, hard look at these assistance programs, eliminating duplicative efforts and directing aid first to the neediest of our population.

We also have to embolden charities, local groups, and private-sector initiatives to empower individuals through programs that require more "skin in the game." Far too often, these good Samaritans are pushed aside by government zeal to provide inferior and bureaucratized services. And finally, we need to reform entitlement programs like Medicare and Social Security so that they are viable for future generations without bankrupting our country.

Your independence is a precious gift, protected by the Constitution and enshrined in the Bill of Rights. Fight for it. I know I will.

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